Chapter 14
Pamplona: Neighbourhood Children Services—A Grassroots and Local Council Initiative

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14.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we analyse a programme that was born of a grassroots initiative of several neighbourhood associations and was taken up by the local council of Pamplona. During the early 1990s, several neighbourhood associations set up educational activities for children that the local authorities integrated into their children services structure as "community children teams" aimed at providing "community preventive action services". This has developed into a specific model of local public service provision by community organisations where many of the complexities and ambivalences of the co-production of services and of social innovations may be seen.

14.2 The Context

Pamplona is the capital of Navarra, a small region in Northern Spain. Its urban area of 353,000 inhabitants makes up for slightly over half of the region's population.

The regional and local governments have frequently boasted of having a level of social service provision clearly above the Spanish average, and of "pioneering" the development of social services. Financially and politically strong regional and local governments in a small, comparatively wealthy and less unequal region has allowed for a stronger development of social services. In some cases, especially during the

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1980s and early 1990s, this meant the introduction of services previously unknown in the region.

Civil society organisations have a long tradition in Navarra. This stems from a strong conservative tradition of local self-government, going back to the "Carlist" traditionalism of the nineteenth century, from the strength of the Catholic Church and its organisations, and from the complex political development of these traditions since the 1960s. The radical changes undergone in Navarra since the 1960s transformed a rural agrarian region into an industrial and service-based one, concentrated most of its population in the capital, Pamplona, and opened up dramatic political cleavages between left and right, and between Basque nationalism and Navarrese regionalism.

Third sector organisations emerging of these processes are generally very much respected by most of the political and social spectrum, as they represent the solidaristic "soul" of Navarra and its concern for the weakest. Although social innovation does not seem to be an explicit political priority, new initiatives coming from these organisations are usually seen with sympathy, even when they challenge the dominant views in the political sphere. In many cases, the orientations and values of these initiatives openly depart from dominant orientations, as for example when flexibility and "informality" in the way of addressing users are opposed to formalised "managerial" approaches, or when the social value of workplace relations is opposed to dominant "work-first" activation approaches (Aguilar Hendrickson 2013).

These innovative initiatives may be integrated in several ways. In some cases, they may be seen as limited actions for some special cases that fall out of the mainstream programs, and require a careful personalised treatment, for which TSOs seem to be the perfect solution. This may be widely accepted by the left (as a way of expanding social action when it is not possible to do it directly by means of public programs) and the right that feels quite comfortable when expanding the role of TSOs and limiting direct public provision. In other cases, a widespread political consensus may not translate into actual priorities. The possibility of integrating the initiatives into two different (and sometimes opposed) narratives helps to establish consensus in many cases.

Aside from TSO initiatives and government predisposition towards allowing TSOs to develop their initiatives, pressure from the European Union (EU) and the central government have played a role. The pressure to establish action plans for social inclusion (Navarra set up its own plan long before it became compulsory) has eased the development of some initiatives (something has to be done in a specific field). On the other hand, the widespread discourse on "best practices" has encouraged the development of innovative initiatives, although they do not always make their way into the mainstream.

14.3 The Development of Neighbourhood Children's Services in Pamplona

The group of associations we are analysing in Pamplona carry out social activities aimed at the prevention of social problems amongst children. It is the result of a movement of community associations that developed leisure activities for children and of their integration into the local government structure of social services, while retaining a peculiar way of working.

The first of these associations, Umetxea Sanduzelai, was created in 1990. They tried to keep a balance between their traditional "political" role of claiming for more and better services in their neighbourhood and a new role as service providers. They tried to create social and cultural projects, mostly aimed at children, pooling the resources of several neighbourhood groups. These projects became quite successful. By 1994, some people in the local social services begin to see that these associations are being more successful in this field than their own public prevention programs, which many people in the neighbourhoods thought quite useless.

The neighbourhood associations have been suspect for possible sympathies with radical left wing parties and radical Basque nationalism, which in the context of political violence and of a serious political cleavage between Basque nationalism and Navarrese regionalism certainly did not make relationships easy. Somewhat surprisingly, it was a centre-right regionalist councillor who decided to establish a long-term agreement between the municipality and the associations. Although there was a strong and politicised debate, in the end the councillor said that "they work fine and they are much less expensive than other providers".

Since 1995 in one neighbourhood and since 1997 in the other three, these associations are responsible for the so-called Community Preventive Action Service, a part of the local Family and Children Welfare Program. The typical activities of these programmes are leisure activities for different groups of children, including activity groups and playgrounds for the youngest, summer camps, neighbourhood festivals and networking amongst teenagers (2011). In some cases, it has meant not encouraging but supporting and accompanying actions like the squatting of an abandoned factory.

The future of the program has been uncertain in several occasions. The agreements established in 1995–1997 ended in 2013. The local council has favoured since the late 1990s private providers that fit better into an entrepreneurial model, with whom they agree specific outcomes and targets in a much more managerial way. The existing TSOs are much more flexible, they are able to mobilise much more local resources, but they do so by being less hierarchic and formal in their relation with the local government. After a complex process, the agreements have been renewed for several years.

14.3.1 Conceptions and Ways of Addressing Users

The traditional boundaries between practitioners and service users are somewhat blurred in these projects. There are certainly practitioners, who get paid for their job and are bound by a contract with the local council, but they are neighbours as well, and a local neighbourhood association hires them. Since they organise activities for the young and children, volunteer neighbours who take part in the activities carry out a large part of the actual implementation of the project (thus, they are service users and producers at the same time). And although some specific work is done to integrate children with special difficulties in the activities, there is no visible difference between them and other participants. "In our projects volunteers are as important as professional practitioners. Volunteers are not of the kind that shows up for an hour, but people who live here. (…) We promote the rights of the kids, so the kids are our bosses. They [the local government managers] don't think in terms of rights, they told us don't talk about rights, talk about problems and needs".

The concept of neighbourhood is central to the work of these projects. Even if neighbourhoods may be relatively small, the feeling of belonging may be very strong, and it is very significant for newcomers (migrants) as well.

> In Pamplona the question of locality is very important. Whoever hasn't experienced it and doesn't know a neighbourhood has a citywide outlook. That's what happens to local councillors, (…) who don't know about it and don't understand it. If you take away the idea of neighbourhood from these kids you'll kill them. For migrants, their only identity here is that of the neighbourhood. They're neither from Pamplona nor from Spain, but they're certainly from San Jorge [the name of one of the neighbourhoods].

The project works specifically with children with special needs both integrating them into activities and offering personal support and accompaniment. This role is different from the one played by ordinary child support services, which should be seen as different and separated. "[Control and support] should be separated, not only conceptually but in practice as well. Our space should be a space to look ahead and theirs as a space of protection if the children's rights are being violated".

14.3.2 Organisation and Modes of Working

The concept of working to promote the rights of children appears to be connected to the concept of autonomy of the projects, even if they belong to the local government. The projects consider themselves accountable first to the children and the neighbours.

> [In our case] either the project is based on the concept of rights or we don't do it. The question of our autonomy is basic, because without it we can't carry them out, and our autonomy has practical effects, for it allows us a margin of flexibility and of method innovation that other projects don't have. In our team sometimes each [of the three formally hired educators/social workers] takes responsibility for an area, but sometimes a few youngsters join us and its 5 or 6 of us managing the project. We can do that, but public employees can't, and private providers can only do it at the expense of their workers.

14.3.3 Governance

The triangle made up of the local council (responsible for the service as a whole), the associations (who have a legal agreement with the local council to carry it out) and the practitioners (who are employees of the association but are, in practice, integrated in the local social services organisation) allows for the aforementioned autonomy of the projects. Practitioners tend to speak the same language (with some nuances) as the local social services staff, but the leaders of the associations are local neighbours with a strong commitment to their neighbours and tend to be much more "straight to the point".

> The kind of associations we work in is special, and our bosses are our fellows in all its complexity. (…) There was one of those meetings with the local council after a cutback of 50 per cent of our activity budget. We were very angry, and we as a team wrote down a document against the cutback, and the director of social services said she had nothing to talk with us and that she'd only talk to the leaders of the association, to our bosses. OK, go ahead! Now she prefers to talk to us.

The relationship between the associations and the local council is quite conflictive, in spite of, or maybe because of, a close relationship as direct providers of services commissioned by the local council.

14.4 Conclusions

The experience of the Neighbourhood Children's Services raises some interesting questions on the political and social conditions of innovative practices. One might tend to believe that innovations are more likely to appear and develop in contexts where there is a strong political commitment to promote innovation and where such commitment is more consistent, less affected by partisan quarrelling, and where actors such as governing bodies and innovation developers are open to cooperate in good terms. One might as well associate innovation with developed and knowledge-oriented environments. This case seems to support a rather different view. Some successful innovations (having lasted almost 20 years and a positive record of results is arguably success) may be possible in a context where innovation was not a priority and where political rivalries and mistrust (specifically between innovation developers and governing bodies) were, and still are, quite strong. This suggests that in some cases "disorganised" and conflictual environments may leave more gaps open to innovative initiatives than consistent ones. It certainly does not make the life and work of innovators easier, but it may give them more leeway. Innovations may be "easier" in such contexts when it is possible to integrate them into different, sometimes opposite, narratives. In our case, proximity to users, flexibility and user participation and coproduction could be put into a left wing innovative and participatory narrative, but also into a right wing traditional conservative narrative on community involvement.

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